

1130
The Immutable Counsels of Jehovah,

A

SERMON,

PREACHED JANUARY 10, 1796,

TO THE

Independent Congregation

in

PARADISE-STREET,

BIRMINGHAM.

By *ROBERT LITTLE.*

THE COUNSELS OF THE LORD STANDETH FOR EVER, THE
THOUGHTS OF HIS HEART TO ALL GENERATIONS.

PSA. XXXIII. 11.

Happy the man who sees a God employ'd
In all the good and ill that chequer life!
Resolving all events, with their effects,
And manifold results, into the will
And arbitration wise, of the Supreme.
Did not his eye rule all things, and intend
The least of our concerns (since from the least
The greatest oft originate,) could chance
Find place in his dominion, or dispose
One lawless particle to thwart his plan,
Then God might be surpris'd, and unforeseen
Contingence might alarm him, and disturb
The smooth and equal course of his affairs.

COWPER'S Time Piece.

BIRMINGHAM,

Printed by James Belcher.

Sold by T. CHAPMAN, Fleet-street, London; FENLY, Bristol;
MERRIDEW, Coventry; T. LUCAS, Birmingham;
and at the Vestry of Paradise Meeting.

SEEMON

REACHED JANUARY 1, 1850

Independent Congress

PARADISE STREET

BRISTOL

ROBERT TYPED



THE COUNCIL OF THE
THOUGHTS OF
THE BRITISH MUSEUM

Having the honor to inform you that the
In all the great and in the great
Receiving all events with the same
And having the honor to inform you that
And having the honor to inform you that
Did not the same all things and
The result of the same (the same the
The result of the same (the same the
And place in the same of the same
One having the honor to inform you that
That God might be informed and informed
Conscience might be informed and informed
The same and the same and the same
Conscience might be informed and informed

BRISTOL

Printed by James Smith

Sold by T. CHAPMAN, 10, New Street, Bristol.
Bristol, 1850. T. CHAPMAN, 10, New Street, Bristol.
and the West of England.

P R E F A C E.

TO any who enquire the reason of the present publication, I should reply, the same motive induced me to publish, which occasioned it to be preached. It is my duty to do the latter, for the instruction of those who have placed themselves under my pastoral care. And whenever it is by their request, and apparently for their advantage, I cannot consistently withhold the former. With respect to the substance of it, it cannot justly be thought unimportant. Polemical discourses, however some may affect to disregard them, are productive of immense advantages to the Church of Christ. By the collision of disputants, truth has been freed from those

obscurities which attach themselves to it, in an age of indifference.

I cannot conceive a man justly liable to be charged with want of *free enquiry*, because he espouses with warmth a system which has been held for ages. He has enquired well—if he has found sufficient evidence of the truth of what he defends.—Novelty does not appear to be a proper test of Rationality. In Philosophy, it has been proved that the sun moves not round the earth, as the ancients believed. But we, as well as them, are satisfied by demonstrative proof, that all the light and heat in our system, are derived from that luminary. We discard not the truths they held, because we detect their errors. Let us do so in Religion. In the mass of superstition, which encumbered christianity for ages, we may still discover, glowing with heavenly lustre, truths, in their nature eternal. Let us assort with care the precious gems; and beware lest, in our zeal for the superior intelligence

P R E F A C E.

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telligence of a more enlightened age, we reject those doctrines which originate in divine revelation, and are the only sure guide to Eternal Joy.

The following Sermon is only a compilation, of what has many a time been said and written on this subject; and is printed solely for the use, and gratification of those who attend on the Author's ministry. Many of these want both opportunity and inclination to peruse large volumes on such subjects; yet may desire to have their minds prepared with a reasonable statement of the truths they profess; lest the temptations to error, should assault them unarmed.

To inform the minds of these, has been my business, and constant aim, for near five years past; and, I trust, this employment will continue my only business, and chief pleasure, during the remainder of my days.

To those who desired the printing of
this sermon, it is with pleasure dedicated,
by

Their affectionate Pastor,

and Servant, in the cause

of our divine Master,

ROBERT LITTLE.

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The immutable Counsels of Jehovah,

A SERMON.

ACTS IV. 28.

FOR TO DO WHATSOEVER THY HAND AND THY
COUNSEL DETERMINED BEFORE TO BE DONE.

SUCH was the view the Apostles had of the malice and cruelty exercised by Jews and Romans in the crucifixion of the Son of God. Their situation was peculiar. Their Lord had just expired in ignominy, and contempt. They had seen him betrayed by a traitor—bound as a criminal—insulted as a slave—and condemned as a vile malefactor. They had witnessed the torrents of blasphemy, and execrations poured on him by the multitude, as he ascended to *Calvary*, where he was basely murdered; being nailed to the cross between two thieves. And, as if nothing could satiate his blood-thirsty foes, he was, even there, denied that pity, which the most iniquitous of the human race, claim in the hour of their sufferings, under the hand of justice. Scoffs were added to

the horrors of death; and after the stroke of death was past, an insulting attendant thrust a spear into his heart. In all this, there was a great deal of wanton cruelty, and the most exorbitant wickedness. Devils, were the instigators of such an horrid proceeding; and the vilest of men were the instruments of these enormities. But the apostles reconciled their troubled minds to all that had transpired, by considering, that they had only done what the Lord's hand and counsel had determined before to be done. The very same reasoning, could reconcile them to, and support them under, all the trials they themselves had met with; and which yet stood before them, in formidable array. Indeed, I cannot conceive how a man who denies, or even doubts of the decrees of God, determining all events, could have sustained the amazing load of calamity and grief, which fell to the apostles share. They had an unfailing source of consolation. They could go to that throne of grace, to which the oppressed never seek in vain: They could advert to those scriptures, where all these events were predicted with literal exactness: They could place their confidence in that God, who, in the midst of seeming confusion, makes men and devils only instruments to effect his designs. This, they not only could do, but they did, (*Ver. 24.*) "They
" lifted up their voice to God with one accord, and
" said, Lord, thou art God, which hast made hea-
" ven and earth, and the sea, and all that in them
" is; who, by the mouth of thy servant David,
" hast

“hast said, Why did the heathen rage, and the
“people imagine vain things? The kings of the
“earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered to-
“gether against the Lord, and against his Christ,
“For of a truth, against thy holy child Jesus, whom
“thou hast anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pi-
“late, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel,
“were gathered together, for to do whatsoever thy
“hand and thy counsel determined * before to be
“done.” This latter assertion of the apostles, may
serve as a solution to every other dark and difficult
providence, which we meet with, either on the page
of history, or in our own experience, and relative
concerns among our fellow-creatures. It is the
christians privilege, to look above all second cau-
ses; and while the minds of others are filled with
perturbation and distress, to say, “Is there evil in
“the city, and the Lord hath not done it?”
Amos, iii. 6.

* *Πρωποτε*, the word used in the original, signifies, according to
LEIGH, Prius definitio, prae destino, prae finio; DAWSON, prius definitio;
and PARKHURST, to decree, ordain before-hand, foreappoint. All
which means a great deal more than merely an allusion to the various pro-
phesies of the Old Testament, concerning the sufferings of Christ. For,
although the language of prophecy spake of Christ's sufferings; yet,
prophecy could not be said to PREDESTINATE, APPOINT, and PRE-
SCRIBE THE MEASURE, OR BOUNDS of those sufferings; yet, all
this is implied in the original text. Beside, the scripture elsewhere
speaks of the sufferings of Christ, as foreordained “before the founda-
tion of the world.” 1 Pet. i. 20. None surely, will apply this to
prophecy.

I inserted this note, merely for their sakes—who are ever laying the
axe of absurd criticism, at the root of Truth.

With

With a design to establish your hearts in a doctrine so salutary, as that implied in the words of our text, I have chosen it to afford a subject for our present discourse. The doctrine is, **THE IMMUTABLE DECREES OF GOD.**

I. I shall attempt to explain the doctrine.

II. Consider the objections which are urged against it.

III. Shew what practical inferences may be drawn from it.

First. Let us attempt an explanation of the doctrine itself.

Most truths are capable of an improper statement; and many of the doctrines of the gospel, have been traduced as absurdities, for want of clear definitions, which might have obviated the seeming difficulties that attend them. Perhaps, no concise definition of this doctrine can be clearer, than that we teach our children, in the Assemblies Catechism.

“What are the decrees of God?” A. “The decrees of God, are his eternal purpose according to the counsel of his will, whereby, for his own glory, he hath fore-ordained whatsoever comes to pass.”

This short view of the subject, comprises all that is needful to be understood and received;
and

and may, undoubtedly, be established on the firm foundation of the scriptures of truth.

The decrees of God are eternal. Whatsoever Jehovah hath purposed, and fixed to be done; has been so purposed and fixed from eternity. He is immutable. "Of one mind, and none can turn him." If it could ever be proved, that there was a period, when the Lord adopted a resolution, which before had not made a part of his counsels; it would at once overthrow the doctrine of his unchangeableness: that is, it would undeify him. We, who are too ignorant to foresee future events; and too weak to execute all our purposes—may see fit, frequently to alter our designs. But him, who is consummately perfect, in wisdom and power, is under no such necessity. If God, therefore, cannot, consistent with his own nature, change his designs; and he has been eternally, what he is now—a self-existent, and all-wise being—it follows, of course, that his decrees must be eternal, as himself. No growth in knowledge, no change of will, are admissible in him. Every thing of this kind, implies imperfection, which comports not with the dignity of our God. Therefore, when an inspired writer refers to the Lord's purpose, as the origin of the christian's privileges, he calls it "his eternal purpose." *Ephes. iii. 2.* And to say, that God from all eternity, fore-knew whatsoever should come to pass, but that he did not decree them, so as to make their existence infallibly certain, is to contradict a truth,

truth, which is capable of demonstration. God could not fore-know the existence of any thing, the existence of which was not made previously certain; else, instead of foreknowledge, it would dwindle into a delusive expectation of what might never come to pass. There was no being but himself, who could make any future occurrence infallibly certain; therefore, he must have done this in his counsel and decree, else they never could have been objects of his foreknowledge. Hence we read in *Acts* ii. 23, "The determinate counsel "and foreknowledge of God." Where the foreknowledge of God is placed in order, after his decree, which determined the occurrence he foreknew,

The Decrees of God comprehend all events. The smallest—as well as the largest. Those that are of greater magnitude, and importance; and those which are lesser, and more insignificant. He not only fixed the dates, and circumstances, of the most material incidents, predicted in revelation, or recorded on the page of history;—such as the revolutions of states, or destruction of kingdoms; but all individuals are prescribed their bounds and stations. Does not the apostle assert as much as this? "And hath made, of one blood, all nations "of men, for to dwell on all the face of the earth, "and hath determined the times before appointed, "and the bounds of their habitation." *Acts* xvii. 26. It is not, as some think, derogatory to the glory

glory of God, to stoop to notice and to fix the meanest affairs of men: Rather, it is establishing his glory, as the supreme governor of all worlds, and disposer of all events.

When men design a great work, it is common for them to fix only on some of the leading features of their general plan; and determine with precision, on a few incidents which cannot well be omitted; leaving the rest to be filled up at the moment, as the circumstances of the time may admit of. But what is this, but an acknowledgement how short-sighted human nature is? We know not what a day may bring forth! therefore, we cannot determine certainly, on the minutiae of our future conduct. But God surveys with equal exactness, the fall of an empire, and the existence of a worm. There is nothing so great, as to be above his controul: nothing so diminutive as to be hid from his notice.

“ There’s not a sparrow or a worm

“ But’s found in his decrees;

“ He raises monarchs to the throne,

“ And sinks them when he please.”

God often adverts to this, in his word, to convince men of the horrid folly, and impiety of departing from him. “ I have declared the former things from the beginning; and they went forth out of my mouth, and I shewed them: I did them suddenly, and they came to pass. Because I knew that thou art obstinate, and thy neck is
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“an iron sinew, and thy brow brass; I have, even
 “from the beginning, declared it to thee; before it
 “came to pass I shewed it thee; lest thou shouldest
 “say mine idol hath done them.” *Isaiab* xlviii.

3, 4, 5. But there is a passage which more directly asserts the truth I am contending for. “Are
 “not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of
 “them shall not fall to the ground without your
 “father. But the very hairs of your head are all
 “numbered.” *Matt.* x. 29, 30. And this is spoken
 by him, who, on account of his perfect knowledge
 of the eternal purposes of God, is said to be “in
 “the bosom of the Father.”

It might be also urged—that small events, have
 sometimes such an influence on larger ones, that the
 certain existence of these, could not be ensured,
 without the previous fixing of those. In a large
 machine, it is not the grand end of the artist that
 a certain small wheel should move in such a direc-
 tion; but it is necessary he should order it so to do,
 that the larger works might not fail to produce
 their effect. Apply this to the designs of God.

*His decrees, are the invariable rule of his govern-
 ment.* That all worlds are subject to the authority
 and power of God, no wise man will ever dispute.
 The reins of government are in his hand. Nor
 may his government be called an arbitrary one;
 for whatsoever he doth, is according to a wisely-
 ordained plan. His *will*, is, undoubtedly, the law
 which

which regulates his conduct; but then, it is not as with us, the capricious result of a moment's reflection, but it is his eternal will. And, agreeably to the perfect wisdom and rectitude of his nature, he wills that which is, upon the whole, infinitely wisest and best. And in the execution of that will, he is not thwarted by men or devils. Nay, every thing they do, contributes to forward his designs. And while their intentions may be to impede the progress of his works, and maintain hostilities with him; he makes them his reluctant slaves, and forces them to accomplish his purposes. Whatever irregularity and confusion may appear, in the mystical workings of Providence, to a superficial observer; we may say of them, as a poet says of the starry firmament, they are "then most regular, when "most irregular they seem." Tyrants, may raise their heads with blustering pride, above their fellow worms, and vainly imagine themselves the lords of creation; but their ambition, rapacity, and pride, are subservient to the accomplishment of his pre-concerted plan. He changes not his rule, to accommodate any of his creatures. Nor doth he suffer the wild schemes of mortals, to interfere with his operations. And, however hard it may be to account for the sin, error, and devastation which has taken place in this world; yet, we may rest assured, that these, with every thing else, are according to the counsel of his will. Even the hellish broils, and savage ferocity of some of the children of men, are in perfect conformity to his decrees,

crees, and eventually promote his glory. "The
 "wrath of man shall praise thee; and the remainder
 "of man's wrath shalt thou restrain!" *Psal. lxxvi.*
 10.

Every thing proves the subject we are urging.
 It is *rational* that God, from whom all being, life,
 and motion springs, should determine on all the
 conduct, and final issue of the works of his hands.
 Nor is it in the least reasonable, that he should
 create at random, or govern the universe, in an
 uncertain way.

It is *scriptural*. The Bible every where repre-
 sents God as the first cause of all things. He *bar-*
dened the heart of Pharoah; and *opened* that of
 Lydia. And "Known unto God are all his works,
 "from the beginning." *Acts xv. 18.* This know-
 ledge, as I have already shewn, implies his decree.

The *Character of God*, proves this doctrine.
 It is impossible to maintain, on good grounds, the
 omnipotence, omniscience, and unchangeableness of
 God (however necessary these are, to constitute
 his Deity) without admitting this doctrine of his
 decrees.

The *Redemption of Men by Christ*, proves it.
 There every thing is declared to be in consequence
 of the divine decree. The person of the Re-
 deemer himself—the persons redeemed—the mode
 and application of that redemption—are all said to
 be

be the result of the divine counsels. And a man must be totally blind, or obstinately wicked, who reads his bible, and denies so plain a fact.

Having thus plainly stated this doctrine, in the way in which you are accustomed to hear it glanced at; it follows,

Secondly, to consider the objections which are usually urged against it.

I would not descend so low, as to notice all the petty cavils of infidels; even if I were capable of calling them all to mind. There is no peculiarity of the gospel, but may be sneered at by them, who, with all their affected regard to a free and unbiassed enquiry, are led away by the most superficial reasoning, and commit their judgment to the direction of deluded teachers. But it is easier to sneer, than refute. However, it must be acknowledged, there are some objections to this doctrine, which carry with them a seeming weight, and demand a clear investigation. And if the doctrine we have stated, be true, there is no reason to fear engaging in the task.

Some object, *This statement entirely takes away human freedom, and reduces man to a mere machine, whose actions are worthy of neither praise, nor blame; inasmuch as he is under the necessity of doing this, or that, whether he will or not.*

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This objection appears formidable; and it is of importance that it be well considered. Here then let it be determined, what that freedom of our nature is, which we ought to contend for. It is to be feared, some have confounded the ideas of *freedom*, and *independence*. If, in order to be free, it is meant, that man should not live under the immediate influence of the supreme being;—that he have no bias or inclination either to sin or holiness, but be obliged to consider them both as things equally indifferent, previous to his choice and pursuit of either; and that he should depend upon none but himself, for the exercise and command of his will and inclinations; this is *Independence*, instead of *Freedom*. This unhinges all the work of God; separates man from his maker; and breaks the beautiful chain, by which creation is linked together. The highest angel in glory is not thus free. On the contrary, every creature is perfectly dependent upon God; not only for its existence, but for its mode of operation: and, to suppose otherwise, is to contrive a scheme the most evil and undesirable, and productive of the worst consequences. True human freedom, consists solely in the exercise of will, choice, or inclination; and gratifying these in all possible cases. Nor can we, upon serious reflection, form any other idea of moral freedom, than that of liberty to choose, or refuse, what addresses itself to our understanding with the appearance of good or evil. This freedom we are all conscious we possess. The most wicked character who dwells
upon

upon the globe, must acknowledge that his sins are practised in conformity to his inclination and desires; and with the full bent of his will: and even moral goodness, although it is that to which our will is naturally averse, and from which our minds constantly revolt, till regenerated by divine grace; yet then we do not accede to, or practise it, under an uneasy constraint, or against our inclination; for God hath so ordered it, in his wise counsels, that at the time of his peoples conversion, the impressions made upon their minds from external circumstances, as well as by the immediate energy of the Holy Spirit, should produce a radical change in their *will*: so that now they *choose* holiness, which once they abhorred, and *desire* to love and serve God. “*Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power.*” Psa. cx. 3.

Thus the decrees of God do not bind men to act, *whether they will or not*; but rather confirms the freedom of their will, as we have explained already: nor would it be certain that man should thus be free, had not the counsels of God so fixed it. And can it be said, with the least propriety, that goodness is less good for being foredetermined; and evil less evil because its existence was not left at uncertainty? No, their nature is the same; and the parties so acting are accordingly implicated, inasmuch as they act with the full consent of their

will, and agreeably to their own inclination*. I believe this statement is perfectly consistent with the views of the greatest and best of men, both ancient and modern, on this subject; and with (what is of still more weight with me), the blessed word of God.

It is again objected, *That this doctrine represents God as the author of sin; inasmuch as sin constitutes, not merely a part, but the greatest part by far, of the actions and concerns of men.* If it be meant in this objection, that we believe God to

* Perhaps this may receive light, in the opinion of thoughtful persons, from the following passage.—“The soul, or intellect, depends on its ideas, for the determination of its volitions: else it would will as a blind man walks, at a venture, and in the dark. Those ideas are the daughters of sensation; and can deduce their pedigree from no other quarter. The embodied soul could have no idea of so much as a tree, or a blade of grass, if our distance from those bodies had been such, as to have precluded their respective forms from occurring to the eye. The senses, therefore, are the channels of all our natural perceptions. Which senses are entirely corporeal: as is the brain also, that grand centre to which all their impressions are forwarded, and from whence they immediately act upon the immaterial principle. These corporeal senses receive their impressions from the presence, or impulse of exterior beings. And every one of those exterior beings is dependent, for existence, and for operation, on God most High!”

TOPLADY on Christian and Philosophical Necessity.

If this be true, who does not perceive that mankind may be as free as it is in the nature of humanity to be; and yet be continually acting under the influence of the decrees of God!

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have decreed the existence, quantity, and consequences of sin ; I must frankly acknowledge, that I firmly believe such a position ; from a conviction of its consistency with reason and scripture. If there can be any thing existing in the universe, not depending on the divine will and counsel ; it, or what is the first cause of it, must be a self-existent, independent, being. Two such beings cannot exist : for whatever is so, must be God. To suppose Jehovah can have a rival, equal with himself in any one of his perfections, is absurdity : and, to suppose that either sin, or Satan, are that rival, is blasphemy. Sin could not be the cause of itself ; this is contradictory to common sense ; by making the same thing the *cause*, and the *effect*. Nor could any being produce it, unless God had decreed them as the instrument for this purpose ; which implies in it, the decreeing of the existence of sin. God forbid ! that we should, for the sake of lessening a seeming difficulty, set up an infernal power in competition with himself. Some heathens of old, did believe in two Gods ; the one the author of all *good*, the other the source of all *evil*. But we believe only in one God, from whom all things do proceed.

Satan, as a vile instrument, has produced sin, calamity, and death in this lower world ; but it is obvious, he could not have so done in opposition to the decretive will of God. Nor is such a

view of this subject merely supportable by reason ; for we have many facts recorded in scripture, which prove that God does decree those actions, which in the men who commit them are exceedingly sinful. Consult the instance of Pharoah. Who does not see a monstrous system of impiety in his treatment of Israel ? Behold his cruelty, and rigor.— With what sovereign contempt does he speak of Jehovah ? “ *Who is the Lord, that I should obey him ?* ” How stout-hearted in the midst of awful judgments ? How hypocritical in his pretended repentances ? Can hell itself more than equal his insolent wickedness ? But yet the Lord, from the beginning of that event, declared his purpose, that thus it should be. *Exodus iv, 22. “ I will harden his heart, that he shall not let the people go.”* Accordingly, when the events took place, we find it repeatedly recorded, “ *And the Lord hardened Pharoah’s heart.* ” Though it is remarkable, that in the same connection it is said, that “ *Pharoah hardened his* ” own “ *heart ;* ” I suppose to shew, that while this was done in conformity to God’s determination, it was also in perfect coincidence with Pharoah’s will and inclination.

In the circumstance which our text and its connection refers to, we have another instance which corroborates, and confirms this truth. Jesus was crucified, with every mark of wanton cruelty, and savage barbarity ; yet the actors in this bloody scene

Scene only did what the Lord's hand and counsel had determined before to be done: and as a proof of this, his prophets had, in every age, previous to the coming of the Messiah, spoken of these sufferings in language unequivocal, and almost sufficiently clear for an historian of the event. This we have enlarged upon already at the beginning of the discourse. I will just mention, that the rise and progress of Antichrist, though marked with every species of impiety, and blasphemy; was a part of the divine counsels. (1 *Thess.* ii.) it is called, "Man of sin," "Mystery of iniquity," "Son of perdition," "Working of Satan," and a variety of other phrases to shew the detestable evils of that horrible apostacy; and then it is added, that "*God shall send them this strong delusion, that they should believe a lie,*" &c.

Indeed, the scripture is full of proof of this sort; and although I have selected these passages for our present purpose, there are many others equally as striking in the inspired volume. All the conclusion I desire to draw from this, is, that the existence and actings of sin, as well as every thing else, made a part of the divine counsel and decrees. Therefore, to object to the doctrine on this account, is just as reasonable as to say, 'I will not believe the doctrine of God's absolute decrees; because it represents him as decreeing all things.' It might be answered, 'And why not *all things*, as well as *any thing*?'

You will easily see that this reasoning applies to the first sin by which man fell, as well as to any after act of transgression. I expect, indeed, some one to be ready to say, '*Is not this very shocking and awful? Is it not dreadful impiety, thus to lay evil at the door of Deity?*' No! If it can be proved true, it cannot be impious; and if it is worthy of God, it is false delicacy in us to pronounce it shocking.

Human feelings are not to be the test of divine truth; else the torments of the damned would be an insuperable objection to our reception of a part of scripture testimony. It is obvious, that in this way most mistakes, in Religion, as well as in other things, have arisen. But the seeming gloom which attends this subject of our speculation, subsides, by considering the superabounding good, which the permission of evil into this system has been the occasion of. If God is more glorified, and the true nature and perfections of Deity more abundantly displayed in this constitution of things, than they could be by any other; then, instead of it being shocking to assert this doctrine, it will prove to a friend of God highly satisfactory and consolatory. The sufferings of Christ were a great evil, but God chose it, for the good which should thereby be produced. And it is capable of demonstration, that the evils which have been introduced into the world, under the moral government of God, have produced overbalancing good; and

and a greater proportion of happiness to all holy beings.

But it is enquired again, by way of objection, *‘Does not this statement tend to exculpate sinners?’* This I have already answered, by shewing that the divine decrees do not in reality interfere with human freedom, properly considered. Nor do they alter the true nature of Sin, or Holiness. If, therefore, men sin with the full consent of their will; and exercise their faculties according to their inclinations; are they not culpable? Yea, are they not righteously judged and condemned for that in which with their whole hearts they have set themselves against God?

It is objected, also, *That this doctrine is in opposition to many passages of scripture, which speak of God’s unwillingness that sinners should perish.* Suppose, for the sake of a concise answer to this, I single out one text, as a specimen of those usually urged on this occasion, and see how far it operates against our doctrine. “Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die, saith the Lord God, and not that he should return from his ways and live?”—“For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord God.” (*Ezek. xviii. 23, 32*). There is an evident difference between the decretive will of God, and his complacency, or delight in any particular action, considered in itself.

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That God has decreed, for the honour of his government, and glory of his name, the miseries which impenitent sinners shall endure to eternity, is a certain truth. But this by no means proves, or even implies, that God has any pleasure or delight in sin or misery, abstractedly considered. So that the text just quoted, and others of the same kind, may be received in their literal acceptation, without militating in the least against the doctrine we are defending.

Different authors have illustrated this subject, by alluding to an exquisite painting, which, if viewed while under the master's hand, would exhibit many dismal, unlovely shades at first, which an unskilful observer might pronounce hideous, and improper; but, when finished, it would appear that all was necessary to render the piece compleat, and relieve the more brilliant and delicate parts of the picture. Just so, some parts of the Lord's work, may seem undesirable in themselves, and contrary to infinite benevolence; but when the whole system is taken together, it is perfect symmetry, proportion, and beauty—altogether desirable and praise-worthy. This shews the necessity of discriminating between texts of an universal, and others of a limited application. The death of a sinner is not a desirable object in itself, but as it stands connected with the grand œconomy of divine government. We could not justly ascertain

tain at our entrance into the dominions of an earthly prince; that he ruled with rigor and cruelty; because the first object which met our eyes, was a criminal, suffering the agonies of death, by his express order. He might, with propriety, will, such a severe step for the general good, and glory of his government; without being supposed to delight in blood. This will illustrate the government of God.

To conclude this consideration of the main objections against our doctrine—It may just be hinted, that any different scheme, lessens no difficulty or objection which attends this. If you represent God, as reluctant to the admission of evil, and the death of sinners; yet it remains as much a fact as ever, that sin has entered into the world; and sinners do everlastingly die. Only with this difference, that it leads to the sad conclusion—That God is exceedingly pained at the existence of that, which he hates, but has not power to prevent.

Some have imagined, they lessened the difficulty, by asserting, that God has *permitted*, but not *decreed* the existence of evil. If I am not mistaken, the permission, of such a Being as God is, amounts to the same as his decree. He is able to do any thing;—to prevent any thing;—and contrary to his inclination, nothing can exist. Who
can

can distinguish between the permission, and decree of this God? And who does not see that the former, always implies the latter?

I proceed, thirdly, to shew what practical inferences are deducible, from the doctrine thus stated and defended. Many might be urged; but the following are most obvious.

It leads to the most exalted and reverential thoughts of the ever-blessed God. The opposite of this, has been charged upon us, by some; but facts, and experience establish our remark.—When we consider God as the great first cause of every thing which exists; and look at all the wheels of Providence, as moved by his power, and appointment; it may perplex and bewilder us in our attempts to trace him; but it will surely impress us with adoring wonder, at the operation of his hands. But amidst the intricate mazes of human life—if we lose sight of his wise plan, and constant superintendence—we shall be much more perplexed, and have a proportionate less regard for his glorious character.

Nothing can be more natural, than the sublime conclusion, which the inspired penman has affixed to this very subject; after amply discussing it through several chapters. “O! the depth of the
“riches, both of the wisdom and knowledge of
“God!

“ God ! how unsearchable are his judgments, and
“ his ways past finding out ! For who hath known
“ the mind of the Lord ? Or, who hath been his
“ counsellor ? Or, who hath first given to him,
“ and it shall be recompensed to him again ? For
“ of him, and through him, and to him are all
“ things ; to whom be glory for ever. Amen.”
(*Rom. xi. 33—36.*)

It affords comfort to the people of God, under all the darkness, sin, and misery which takes place. Religion does not extinguish our feelings. The calamities of life, as naturally produce dejection and pain in the bosoms of the godly, as the wicked. Indeed, the good man, feels more acutely the afflictions he experiences, than the thoughtless profligate, who hardens his heart against the repeated strokes of Providence. What then is it which reconciles a pious mind, to occurrences the most repugnant to his feelings and views ? Is it the stoical idea, that a blind fatality, irreversibly fixes whatever is, without any connection with means, or a wisely organized scheme ? Or, Is it the resolving all into an undesigning chance, which produces events, the most unlikely, and unexpected ; and may defeat the best contrived plan ? No ; neither of these will satisfy the christian's heart. He finds relief from despondency, while bearing the various burdens of life, by viewing every event, as a well-connected

connected link in the great chain of Providence; contrived by infinite wisdom, and depending on God's decree. It is ours, to acquiesce in what God appoints: and rejoice in believing, that all will infallibly issue in his glory, and the everlasting good of those who trust in him.

It has an humbling effect on the heart of the sinner who receives it. Humility is a gracious disposition; which exalts God, in proportion as it lowers the pride of the human heart. Nothing can more effectually produce or encourage this disposition, than the reception of this doctrine. Whoever has a strong perception of the absolute sovereignty of God, must feel their own insignificance; and admire and adore his condescension to their concerns. One, well expresses this, by observing, under an impressive sense of the sovereignty of God—and his superintendence, and disposal of all concerns, they felt like a little boat, floating in the sun beams. On this subject, I may also appeal to your feelings and experience, who know any thing savingly of the gospel of Christ. Have you not found yourselves most humble, most happy, in those moments when you have contemplated, with most seriousness, the whole plan of creation, providence, and redemption, as wisely projected in the eternal counsels of the Lord, and executed by the continual operations

operations of his power? Yes! the human mind, under the sanctifying influences of divine grace, is at once abased in its own esteem; and enjoys the sweetest sensations of pleasure, in tracing all the lines of Providence, to God as their centre. With such views as these, the believer is constrained often to exclaim—"Lord! what is man, that thou art "mindful of him!"

To conclude, If this representation be founded on fact, *the doctrine we have had under consideration, ought often to be preached and insisted upon.* It is a strange idea with some who profess to believe in the decrees of God, that they ought not to be a subject of pulpit discourses—or general religious instruction. They think it has a tendency to hurt weak minds—to hinder them in the attainment of religious knowledge and practice—and affords to the infidel, abundant objections against the truth.

In opposition to this—we say, Truth cannot produce a bad effect; a partial representation of it, may. There is not a doctrine of christianity, but is capable of abuse, to answer the purposes of Pharisees, or Antinomians. But is the gospel never to be preached, on this account? I think, President *Edwards* somewhere remarks, that his discourses on the Sovereignty and Decrees of God, had the greatest tendency, of any, to produce serious reflection,

tion, and a religious revival, among his hearers. I am sure, from experience, the more these things are properly explained, and insisted upon, the more will infidelity lose ground;—error hide its head abashed;—christian consolation be more extensively, and permanently enjoyed;—and God, the FIRST CAUSE, and CHIEF END of all things, be alone served and glorified.



5 0059

POSTSCRIPT.

THIS Sermon was first printed for the use of the congregation over which the author presides. And only a few copies were permitted to find their way into the hands of strangers. But the earnest request of some friends, has at length induced him to make it more public. It cannot be denied, that in some places, anti-calvinistical sentiments have gained ground: and persons formerly strenuous defenders of the truth, have tamely resigned it, for the poisonous heresies of Socinians and Universalists. It is the wish of the preacher to revive in the bosoms of those who know the truth, that ardent attachment to it; and that watchful jealousy, to ensure its preservation, which distinguished the most eminent characters, whose names adorn the history of the church.

Birmingham, June 1797.

ERRATA.

Title, Motto—for *counsels* read *counsel*.
Page iv. line 14—for *them* read *they*.

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London: Printed by J. G. Smith, 1807.

